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ABSTRACT

A systematic overview of major changes in Wisconsin public school policy suggested by the State's Commission on Schools for the 21st Century is provided in this paper, which is organized around the major themes of the commission's final report. A reform strategy is outlined to meet educational objectives in the following areas: outcome-oriented curriculum; performance-based assessment; student readiness for school; full parent involvement in the educational process; school/community partnerships; the teaching profession; the learning environment; and equitable financing for effective schools. Issues in governance are also discussed at the school, district, and state levels. (LMI)

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Education Issues

SCHOOL REFORM IN WISCONSIN

RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE COMMISSION ON SCHOOLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Bernard R. Brogan

Center for Education
Widener University

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July, 1991

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About the Author

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About the Center

The Wisconsin Center for Education Policy (WICEP) was established in 1990 as a center of the Robert M. La Follette Institute of Public Affairs and is funded by a 5-year grant. The Wisconsin Center for Education Research (WCER) provides additional support.

The purpose of the center is to contribute to improved education policy decisions in Wisconsin through research and dissemination of findings to policy makers and the public.

In addition to preparing a variety of policy papers and surveying the needs of policy makers, WICEP will help develop models and options for a system of Wisconsin educational indicators, a Wisconsin educational policy database, and enhanced analytic capability.

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Comments on the Recommendations of the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century

By and large, this is an extraordinary vision of education for the 21st century.

Herbert Grover
Superintendent, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Early Childhood Education

We need to get kids ready for school and early childhood is where we will make the difference.

Miles Turner
Executive Director
Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators

Choice

Choice is no one's answer. It is destructive in that it is diverting our attention and energy from the real issues.

Ken Cole
Executive Director, Wisconsin Association of School Boards

We see choice as a cruel hoax that doesn't offer any real alternatives to students in Wisconsin. It is a political smokescreen that looks good to the public. Vouchers for private school choice supply a way to get public school money into private schools. There are no requirements or standards for private schools. We also see this as discriminatory to minorities.

Miles Turner
Executive Director
Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators

Parental Involvement

The governor supports parents having a greater role in the education of their children.

Tom Fonfara, *Governor's Office*

Arbitration Law

WEAC is opposed to the proposed changes in the arbitration law. Fact-finding will increase the number of districts going to arbitration and lengthen the process. Currently there is a high degree of risk to both parties involved in the process and the use of a fact-finder would minimize this risk and thus encourage parties not to settle.

Dick Collins
President, Wisconsin Education Association Council

We see the fact-finder extending the amount of time the process will take and don't support the fact-finder having the right to pick and choose language items from both packages. Currently both sides are forced to come as close as possible to the status quo.

Miles Turner
Executive Director
Wisconsin Association of School District Administrators

Private Contracting

We are concerned about recommendations that appear to have a more political agenda than an educational agenda. For example, why is private teacher contracting being recommended? We don't support this move to weaken the union and do not support any kind of teacher bashing.

Charles R. Hilston
Executive Director
Association of Wisconsin School Administrators

Kids in far-flung places need to band together so they receive equitable education. Districts should be able to hire someone who can provide services that they can't provide with their current staff.

John Palmer
Dean, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Teacher Education

There is too much micromanaging of teacher education.

Andy Porter
Director, Wisconsin Center for Education Research

The Commission's recommendations are good, but implementation would cost the University a great deal.

John Palmer
Dean, School of Education, University of Wisconsin–Madison

School Finance

There are many bold and innovative recommendations in the Commission's report—except regarding the issue of financing. In reality, what the finance committee is proposing is a major property tax increase. Funding is key and if we don't deal with the central question of funding, then the rest will fall by the wayside.

Dick Collins
President, Wisconsin Education Association Council

School Reform in Wisconsin

Recommendations of the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century

Bernard R. Brogan

Introduction

On December 21, 1990, the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century presented the governor, the state superintendent, and the people of Wisconsin with a comprehensive educational reform package designed to make public schools in Wisconsin responsive to the current and future needs of students and society. The recommendations call for a systematic state policy built around new educational goals and achieved through a decentralized performance-based accountability system. Collectively, the 168 recommendations call for a major restructuring of public education that will require increased investment and renewed partnerships between schools, parents, and the community.

The lack of cohesion in reform efforts during the last ten years has resulted in valid criticism that these efforts have been fragmented and piecemeal. The purpose of this paper is to present a systematic overview of the major changes in public school policy suggested by the recommendations of the commission. Although these recommendations provide ample opportunity for various interpretations, this paper is organized around the major themes found in the commission's final report, *A New Design for Education in Wisconsin: Schools Capable of Continuous Improvement*.[1] The commission report translates the individual recommendations of the commission into a coherent educational reform package. Any interpretation, no matter how true to its original source, runs the risk of emphasizing one point at the expense of another. Although this paper seeks to reflect objectively the work of the commission, the conclusions are my own and do not necessarily represent the conclusions of individual members of the commission or the Wisconsin Center for Educational Policy.

About the Commission

In December 1989, Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson signed an Executive Order establishing the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century. The 76-member commission was directed to examine and recommend appropriate changes to the major school inputs

influencing student achievement and future productivity. The commissioners were organized into eight committees: Student Readiness; Teacher and Administrator Supply and Quality; Curriculum and Standards; Educational Assessment; School Organization; School and Community; Technology, Science, and Mathematics; and Finance. After several months of deliberation which included listening to testimony throughout the state, each committee prepared its own report and in September 1990, the commission began the process of adopting the recommendations of the individual committees. On December 21, 1990, the commission chair, Mr. Ody Fish, presented to Governor Thompson and State Superintendent Herbert J. Grover a report containing 168 recommendations that collectively call for a major restructuring of public schools in Wisconsin. In February 1991, several recommendations from the commission report appeared in the governor's budget bill. The governor has promised to introduce the entire reform package as an omnibus education bill later this year. A blue-ribbon implementation committee has been formed to convert the recommendations into actual statutes and rules.

Background to the Commission's Recommendations

The assertion that Wisconsin public schools rank among the best in the nation is supported by a number of indicators: ACT scores are among the best when compared to other states; the level of teacher satisfaction is high in comparison to teachers in other states; Department of Public Instruction (DPI) standards and associated publications (e.g., *Curriculum Guides* and *Education for Employment Standard*) are nationally recognized. Wisconsin has a tradition of leadership in school reform: the first kindergarten, the first comprehensive vocational education program, the first state to ensure equal education for the handicapped. Recognizing these educational achievements and Wisconsin's leadership in the 20th century is an appropriate way to introduce the challenges that Wisconsin schools face as they approach the 21st century.

Wisconsin no longer competes solely with other states. A shrinking and increasingly competitive global economy, advanced technologies, and a sophisticated consumer goods market require that Wisconsin graduates have strong reasoning and analytic skills. International comparisons, however, place the United States dead last in science and math achievement, and there is no evidence that Wisconsin students perform significantly better than students from other states. Many business leaders are openly candid about their dissatisfaction with the quality of high school graduates and the negative impact that this condition is having on the ability of their companies to vie with

international companies. Likewise, college professors in Wisconsin and elsewhere are voicing their concern about the decline in the academic preparedness of high school graduates enrolled in their courses. Here too, there is little evidence that Wisconsin graduates are better prepared than graduates from other states.

The commission's eight committees carefully examined how well schools are responding to the needs of Wisconsin youth. This task was accomplished by several means including testimony at committee meetings and issue forums; correspondence from citizens; student surveys; educational policy forums; and ongoing inquiries by individual commissioners and the commission chair. The result of these investigations provided convincing evidence that changing conditions in the family, in the schools, and in society in general are having a serious effect on the ability of schools to accomplish their academic mission.[2] These conditions, along with the growing dependence of the economy on effective education, motivated the commission to identify the following major objectives for school reform in Wisconsin:

- The success of Wisconsin schools will be measured by performance outcomes, and all schools will improve their performance.
- All children will be ready to begin school.
- Parents will be fully involved in the educational process.
- Quality education will be achieved through community partnerships.
- Wisconsin teachers will have the resources, preparation, and encouragement to teach successfully in a results-oriented environment.
- The learning environment will provide every opportunity for student success.
- School finance will be fair and equitable.

A Strategy for Achieving the Objectives of School Reform

An Outcome-Oriented Curriculum

The commission recommended that Wisconsin schools should sharpen their academic mission and the state establish clear and specific educational goals. These educational goals should define what all Wisconsin high school graduates are expected to know and be able to do as a result of their schooling. The commission recommended that a task force of curriculum experts define the essential learner outcomes

to be achieved by tenth grade and design a curriculum framework to help guide what students learn in seven major areas: academic foundations, analytic skills, human relations, personal growth, global participation, career and occupations, and citizenship. Experiences, projects, writing, presentations, and other assignments that engage students daily in higher level, critical, and creative thinking should be the method employed in the learning process.

Performance-Based Assessment

The recommendations of the commission emphasize that the success of Wisconsin schools should measure not "what students are supposed to know," but rather "what students do know." Each school should be responsible for developing its own strategy for achieving the objectives of the curriculum framework and should be judged on how well they accomplish those objectives. The state should evaluate the performance of each school district and provide the findings in *School Report Cards* to school boards, school principals and staff, parents and students, and the community at large. The commission recommended that successful schools be recognized and rewarded with incentive grants and that school improvement teams assist the lowest performing schools with planning, evaluation, organization, and management.

To ensure continuous academic progress, the commission recommended that a formal educational assessment policy for the state be developed by an Educational Assessment Policy Council and that educational outcomes be assessed at regular intervals throughout the students' elementary and secondary schooling. These assessments should assist schools and parents in planning developmentally appropriate educational programs throughout the students' school years. At the completion of the tenth grade, students should achieve a level of mastery currently associated with expectations for graduation from high school. Wisconsin schools should then provide a variety of learning options designed to meet the varying needs, talents, and interests of high school students. For some students, this may mean continued emphasis on the common essential learner outcomes; for others this may mean taking courses at area postsecondary institutions; for others this may mean participation in on-the-job apprenticeship programs. These multiple options should provide 11th and 12th grade students with a bridge between school and a meaningful and productive adult life.

The commission's strategy for improving education in Wisconsin goes beyond the call for a shift to an outcome-oriented, performance-based educational model. The individual recommendations emphasize the importance of early education, parent and community involve-

ment, quality teacher education programs, and ongoing professional development. The recommendations underscore the need to improve substantially science, math, and technology education and furnish students with a modern and supportive learning environment. The recommendations also address the growing concern over how best to finance public education and offer specific proposals for equitable school funding.

Students Ready for School

The commission recommended that children begin the learning process earlier. At age three, all children should be assessed to determine their individual educational needs. This assessment should identify needs and prescribe developmentally appropriate experiences necessary so that each five-year-old child can enter school ready to learn. Those needing special attention should receive it through Head Start and other early education programs initiated and supported through joint collaboration among schools, social service agencies, and community-based organizations.

The commission recommended that children begin their formal education in an environment that is conducive to learning and free from many of the obstacles that interfere with the learning process. Specific recommendations focus on the nutritional needs of children, health care, and quality before- and after-school programs. The recommendations also call for a learning environment that is sensitive to the developmental needs of the individual student. Students should be active learners, growing through progressive experiences in seeking, organizing, and applying knowledge and skills in cooperative learning environments. Students should have continuous opportunities to grow intellectually and emotionally through investigation of important facts, values, and concepts, creative expression in the fine arts, integration of mathematics into multidisciplinary scientific and technical applications, creative hands-on problem-solving, and collaboration with fellow students and teachers.

Parents Fully Involved in the Educational Process

The commission recognized that parent involvement is essential to student achievement and recommended a number of ways to enhance the role of the family in the school system. Some of the recommendations are simple and involve little more than reaching out to parents and making the message clear that parents are welcomed partners in the educational process. Other recommendations are more complex and involve changing the basic structure of school governance in ways that offer parents a role in the decision-making process. The commis-

sion recommended that each school building initiate a plan that involves parents on school councils and actively encourages volunteering at school. Parents should understand the expectations of the school and be carefully informed on the progress of their child. Parents should have the ultimate responsibility of choosing the school that best fits the needs and interests of their child, regardless of where that school is located. In addition to open enrollment, the commission recommended that three pilot programs of private school choice be instituted to allow parents to send their child(ren) to private nonsectarian schools with public funding.

School Partnerships with the Total Community

The recommendations of the commission clearly recognize that preparing Wisconsin youth for the world of tomorrow cannot be done by the schools alone. A new educational compact based on partnerships between schools and the community is required. The recommendations call for the adoption of a comprehensive policy for the development of youth through interagency collaboration at the local, regional, and state level. These partnerships should promote more efficient services to families and reinforce effective delivery of academic programs by Wisconsin schools. Tapping the almost unlimited potential of school facilities as year-round Lifelong Learning Centers, the commission recommended that partnerships be promoted with vocational-technical institutions, colleges and universities, the business community, and other community agencies and organizations. Community agencies and organizations should be encouraged to use available facilities in and near the schools to provide support services to children. In addition, the commission recommended that an "Educational Service Corps" of older adults be created to mobilize volunteers as resources to supplement the efforts of teachers, administrators, and other school professionals.

The Teaching Profession

The commission charged teachers with the primary responsibility for achieving the state educational goals and the objectives of the curriculum framework, and recommended extensive measures that will give teachers ample opportunity to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to implement outcome-oriented instruction and assessment. High academic standards are needed in teacher preparation programs that insure that individuals entering the teaching profession are fully prepared in the knowledge, pedagogy, and learning assessment techniques needed to teach successfully in an outcome-oriented system. In addition, future teachers should have demonstrated the

knowledge and skills required to foster active learning, teach higher-order thinking, and teach cross-disciplinary subjects in an integrated learning environment. The commission specifically recommended the establishment of Teacher Practice Demonstration Centers, located in the schools and sponsored jointly by the schools and teacher training institutions.

Beginning teachers should be provided special assistance through staff development, mentoring, and flexible assignments. Ongoing professional development for teachers should be a high priority and teachers should be given the opportunity to advance within their professions through career ladders and year-long contracts. In addition to paid sabbatical programs, exchange programs with local industry, and an increase in the number of staff development days, teachers should have adequate time for collaborative planning, classroom visitation, and lesson preparation. The commission further recommended that career counseling should be available for teachers whose performance indicates that they need assistance in finding more appropriate jobs, and that school boards should have a fair and reasonable procedure for dismissing inadequate teachers.

The Learning Environment

The recommendations of the commission call for a major investment in state-of-the-art technology. If students are to achieve the necessary proficiency in integrated applications of knowledge and higher-order problem solving, they need access to technical support systems including computers and school libraries that have electronic, on-line library circulation systems and on-line data bases and communication linkages, and other state-of-the-art resources as they are developed. Interactive educational telecommunication systems for educational programming over regional and national distances should provide students in school districts throughout Wisconsin new and expanded learning opportunities.

Equitable Financing for Effective Schools

How best to provide the money necessary to fund effective public education at a time of scarce resources was a question of considerable importance to the commission. The commission recommended that the state should increase its contribution to school costs from 46 to 50 percent. In addition, local property tax equalization features in the state aid formula should be strengthened to support schools more equitably. In order to target limited resources first to support adequate programs in those districts least able to pay, and to provide stronger spending disincentives for those districts with high costs-per-student,

a third tier should be added to the current equalization formula. By recommending that 10 percent be added in the formula for low-income students, the commission recognized the additional costs associated with overcoming the disadvantaged backgrounds of some children.[3]

School Governance

The recommendations of the commission reflect the fundamental belief that no real improvement in school performance will occur until local school professionals have the authority, resources, and responsibility to make it happen. At committee meetings and issue forums, commissioners heard teachers express growing concern over conditions in the classroom that interfere with their ability to teach. Many teachers stated that they felt left out of school policy decisions that directly affect what goes on in their classroom. School administrators are likewise frustrated with the need to comply with outside policies and mandates that stand in the way of school performance. The commission determined that the educational goals of Wisconsin and the major objectives of the commission's reform package will be accomplished only if there is a shift in the focus of school governance from centralized input-oriented mandates to decentralized outcome-oriented performance standards.

Governance at the School Level

The commission recommended that shared decision-making, exercised through school-based management, be the cornerstone of school governance. School-based management, a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement, relies on redistribution of decision-making authority to bring about school improvement. An increase in the local authority of school-based professionals in areas such as budget, personnel, and curriculum is necessary. The commission recommended the formation of *School Councils* comprised of the principal, teachers, parents, community members including business leaders, and when appropriate, students. Based on the statewide educational goals as expressed through the curriculum framework, these councils would be empowered to formulate the school curriculum and design a method for accomplishing the performance outcomes.

The commission further recommended that the collective bargaining process be modified and reconciled with the principles of school-based, collegial management. If the school is to be the primary setting for educational reform, negotiations between school boards and teachers unions should foster the building and maintaining of educational management teams that contribute to the process of educational

improvement. One specific recommendation of the commission is to modify the collective bargaining process by requiring fact-finding before binding arbitration, unless both parties agree to forgo it.

School Governance at the District Level

The geographic, demographic, and economic conditions in Wisconsin's 428 school districts vary significantly.[4] The commission recognized the important role that school boards will serve in establishing policy that fosters improvement in school performance through school-based management. The commission recommended that as the local schools become more accountable for their own school performance, school districts reduce the size and scope of their central offices and function more as facilitators and less as directors of educational policy.

The recommendations specifically require school districts to engage in strategic planning and evaluation for the purpose of achieving higher levels of educational outcomes. The commission encourages school districts to coordinate community and educational services and the use of emerging technologies within their district and with school districts in their local area.

School Governance at the State Level

The commission proposed that school governance at the state level take on the important responsibility of defining the goals of Wisconsin schools—the outcomes which will be measured, assisting (not directing) schools in achieving these goals, and evaluating schools on their success. This evaluation should be done annually and the findings provided to school boards, to school principals and staff, to parents and students, and to the community at large. The recommendations specifically call on the state superintendent, (with the assistance of experts within that office), experts in the schools, and experts in teachers' colleges, to define an appropriate curriculum (or curricula) that schools may wish to adopt or refine for their own conditions. In addition, the commission recommended that the state superintendent's office become a facilitating agency that schools may turn to for assistance. In this capacity, the Department of Public Instruction would serve as a resource center—identifying models of excellence and providing incentives for enhanced performance.

The commission also recommended that the existing standards auditing teams be replaced with school improvement teams with high levels of expertise in school improvement and that these teams work primarily with the lowest performing schools and the least effective school districts.

Conclusion

The seventy-six members of the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century have provided the people of Wisconsin with one of the most comprehensive and systematic educational reform packages in the nation. This paper has highlighted those recommendations that form the foundation for the changes in educational policy that are necessary if Wisconsin is seriously committed to providing world-class education. The recommendations are consistent with reform initiatives advanced in other states and with the national educational goals.

The commission's report is not a convenient message to the people of Wisconsin. Implementing the recommendations of the commission will require a change in the status quo and a greater investment of community and financial resources. The findings of the commission, however, offer persuasive evidence that the recommended changes are necessary and that smart investment in public education now is essential to the well-being of Wisconsin's future.

Notes

1. The Commission report, principally written by Gene Arnn, Executive Director of the Commission on Schools for the 21st Century, had a major influence on the structure of this paper. The first section of the Commission report provides a defensible rationale for reforming public schools and presents a blueprint for how schools should be restructured. The next section explains how Wisconsin should proceed in the restructuring process. A complete listing of the Commission recommendations, committee by committee, is included in the appendices of the Commission report.

2. The Commission report and a related report produced by the Commission, *Wisconsin School Issues: Summary of Nine Issue Forums* (July, 1990) details these conditions.

3. These and other important school finance recommendations are carefully explained in the Commission report.

4. The Commission report contains specific recommendations that address the special needs and problems facing the Milwaukee Public Schools. The Commission report notes, however, that the principles of school reform recommended throughout Wisconsin (e.g. outcome-oriented curriculum, performance-based assessment, school-based management) should be the basis for school improvement in Milwaukee as well.

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